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ABSTRACT

Some misconceptions surround youth organizations and their contribution to career and occupational development. The first myth is that student youth organizations have diminishing value to today's vocational education students. The truth is that vocational educators have identified strong vocational student organizations (VSOs) as an essential component of high quality vocational education. Students are very articulate about the benefits they have realized through participation. Research studies show participation in activities benefits career development. A second myth is that the strength of youth organizations is their focus on leadership activities. According to adult postsecondary members, the primary goal of membership is to develop competencies necessary for employment in a high performance economy. A third myth is that student organizations are nice extracurricular activities for motivated students. Today, student organizations are working to ensure that their activities are integrated into the classroom curriculum. A fourth myth is that teachers' involvement in student organizations remains strong. Teachers are facing a time crunch. To enlist teacher support, some organizations are devising new ways to reach them. A final myth is that state and federal funds provide sole support to VSOs. As federal funds have been cut, states can no longer carry the burden of financial support. VSOs must make stronger efforts to secure support from the business community. (YLB)

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Youth Organizations
Myths and Realities

Bettina A. Lankard

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Myths and **REALITIES**

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by Bettina A. Lankard *1996*

Youth Organizations

Youth organizations have been extremely popular with both secondary and postsecondary vocational education students over the years. Although participation in these organizations has been associated with the development of positive work attitudes and leadership skills, it is unclear the extent to which participation in vocational student organizations (VSOs) contributes to participants' career and occupational development. Have these organizations outlived their usefulness in these times of organizational and technological change? This ***Myths and Realities*** examines some of the misconceptions surrounding youth organizations and their contribution to career and occupational development.

Myth: Student Youth Organizations Have Diminishing Value to Today's Vocational Education Students

On the surface, it appears that vocational student organizations may be losing their appeal to students. Such organizations as Future Farmers of America (FFA), Future Business Leaders of America (FBLA), Distributive Education Clubs of America (DECA), and Future Homemakers of America (FHA) have experienced stagnant or declining memberships since the 1980s (Hannah 1993). However, a closer look reveals that most VSOs have been able to maintain their membership as a percentage of the vocational student population, but are losing the college track students who have less time for vocational program electives and activities. Viewed from this perspective, it is not the value of VSOs that is being challenged by declining enrollments. In fact, their value has been promoted by top vocational educators and by the students themselves and is documented through research.

A report in the February 1994 issue of the ***Vocational Education Journal*** presented the opinions of top vocational educators regarding the question "What is high quality vocational education?" These educators identified the following as essential components: innovative and flexible teachers, meaningful partnerships with business and industry, supportive administrators, technologically current equipment and supplies, and *strong vocational student organizations*. Eddie Parker, Marketing Education Coordinator of Ruidoso High School in Ruidoso, New Mexico identified high quality programs as those that include "active vocational student organizations that provide excellent opportunities for leadership training and development" (Lynch et al. 1994, p. 36). Nancy Raynor, Education Consultant for the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction named as one of her standards for vocational education "an active vocational student organization that integrates technical skills and leadership development" (ibid.).

The students themselves are very articulate about the benefits they have realized through participation. Self-confidence, employer contacts, internship offers, and scholarships are some of the benefits mentioned by the student state officers of FFA (Dykman 1993). Vernezze and Henkel (1993) present the views of several students involved in Gateway Marketing and Management Association (GMMA), a postsecondary affiliate of DECA: one graduate credited GMMA membership for giving him a wealth of ideas, strategies, and contacts. "Its resources come not from students and staff alone but from alumni and business professionals as well" (ibid., p. 26). Another GMMA alumni credits her involvement as giving her an advantage over other applicants in being hired as a sales promotion manager. She specifically highlights the advertising campaign portfolio she developed for national competition and the presentation skills she developed through membership activities as significant in preparing her for the workplace.

Research studies also support the value of student organizations. Bakar and McCracken (1994) examined the relationship between career maturity and participation in the Future Farmers of America and between career maturity and participation in supervised agricultural experience (SAE). For the study purposes, they defined career maturity as "the individual's readiness to make educational and career decisions that are expected of them" (p. 1). Their findings indicated an association between career maturity and participation in FFA, but not between career maturity and participation in SAE. It appears that the process of engaging in organizational activities offers a significant benefit to career development.

Myth: The Strength of Youth Organizations Is Their Focus on Leadership Activities

Many educators subscribe to the belief that there is a relationship between participation in youth organization leadership activities and leadership life skills development. Dormody and Seevers (1994) cite a number of studies showing that those involved in FFA in high school were more likely to be involved in community affairs organizations, school organizations, and church groups and that these individuals had higher leadership and personal development scores than students not involved in youth organizations. In a study conducted to determine the predictors of youth leadership life skills development among 400 1992-1993 FFA members in Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico, Dormody and Seevers found that achievement expectancy had a positive relationship with youth leadership life skills development. Based on these results, recommendations were made to focus on satisfying FFA members' achievement motives when developing FFA leadership activities.

Although membership does have some relationship with leadership skills, is that students' primary motive in joining organizations? When questioned about their motives for joining Vocational Industrial Clubs of America (VICA), almost all the adult postsecondary members surveyed answered "I thought it would help me to get a job" (Hall 1993, p. 28). The primary goal of membership for these students is to develop competencies necessary for employment in a high performance economy. They see membership as a particularly effective way to gain professional experience and establish contacts with employers (ibid.).

Myth: Student Organizations Are Nice Extracurricular Activities for Motivated Students

Although student organizations may once have been content to be companion vocational programs, today they are working to ensure that their activities are integrated into the classroom curriculum. They are writing curriculum packages and materials to help teachers in this process. VICA promotes its Professional Development Program, Total Quality Curriculum, and skills olympics to teachers, describing the materials as useful in "stressing communication , leadership and teamwork, and other employability skills tied to industry employability standards" (Hall 1993, p. 29).

Such curriculum changes are needed to help youth organizations remain vital to student career and occupational development. Although membership in some vocational student organizations has dropped, two organizations have increased membership. These organizations are Technology Student Association (TSA) and the Health Occupations Students of America (HOSA), whose expanding membership can be related to changing career opportunities. "Student organizations must be prepared to roll with the changes in workplace technology and in education, such as tech prep and applied academics" (Hannah 1993, p. 24). TSA has made the turnaround, emphasizing computer systems and problem solving in its curriculum in place of industrial arts shop classes. Business Professionals of America now focuses on broader-based business courses such as computer programming and keyboarding, desktop publishing, and auditing in place of secretarial skills. It has dropped shorthand from its competitive events. FFA has expanded its focus to include "marketing, sales and service, communications, research, forestry and horticulture, as well as farming" (p. 24). The future of VSOs will depend upon their ability to offer relevant opportunities. They must meet the changing needs of education, business, and their student members (Hannah 1993).

Myth: Teachers' Involvement in Student Organizations Remains Strong

Teachers are facing a time crunch. They are being held more accountable for student achievement in curriculum objectives and skill standards and therefore have less time to incorporate VSO activities in the classroom. Working with VSO chapters puts additional pressure on teachers who feel that they are already overworked. Additionally, as an increasing number of vocational teachers come from other disciplines or from industry, they may not have the background or experience that commits them to student organizations as viable opportunities for learning. To enlist teacher support, some organizations are devising new ways to reach them. FHA, for example, sends "newsletters that include tips on curriculum and integrating chapter work into classrooms" (ibid., p. 23). FFA, with a 2-year grant from Monsanto Corporation, was able to develop a marketing plan directed to teachers that would help them communicate to principals, counselors, superintendents, and parents the importance of agricultural education and participation in FFA (ibid.).

Myth: State and Federal Funds Provide Sole Support to VSOs

The 1990 Perkins Act cut funds to support VSOs by 30 percent. State budget cutbacks in vocational programs have caused state supervisors to reduce the time they can devote to student organizations to "5 to 15 percent" (ibid.). Thus, the message is clear. States can no longer carry the burden of financial support. Hannah (1993) presents evidence of recent statewide changes: "Kansas now goes outside the state department of education to hire a VSO coordinator. Student dues must pay for more expenses in Idaho. In Indiana, several VSO responsibilities have been turned over to a consultant who has no travel budget for visits with teachers. New Mexico has the same problem" (p. 23).

"If VSOs are serious about recharging membership, they must make even stronger efforts to secure support from the business community. Corporations can help fund competitions and other VSO activities. Courting their interest also boosts the image of VSOs and can lead to jobs for students" (p. 24). VICA has more than 400 corporations supporting its activities and contests. Business executives are invited to the competitions and activities so they can see what students are doing.

In conclusion, VSOs can remain relevant in today's environment by refocusing on the needs of contemporary students for employability skills, working to integrate program activities with curricula, enlisting teacher involvement, and demonstrating to employers the benefits of supporting VSOs in their efforts to develop future workers.

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